

## Helping Teens in Abusive Relationships

Parents can help their teenagers avoid abusive relationships by making them aware of the myths and realities of dating violence such as:

- ◆ Guys show how much they love you when they are possessive, and sometimes they hit and yell to show their love.

*Reality: Hitting and yelling is just an effective method of controlling another person. It has nothing to do with love.*

- ◆ A guy has the right to show his girlfriend who is boss.

*Reality: No one has the right to control another person. A healthy relationship is based on respect, not control.*

- ◆ A girl has to show her loyalty to her boyfriend by giving up friends, family, and activities for him.

*Reality: A relationship that is based on respect wants the best for the other person and does not make selfish demands. By giving in to unhealthy demands, a girl is enabling his controlling behavior to continue.*

- ◆ A girl must protect her boyfriend at all costs, even if he hurts her or makes her afraid.

*Protecting an abuser is not a sign of love. Love will do what is best for another person by not allowing them to continue in destructive behavior.*

- ◆ It is better to stay with an abusive boyfriend than to be alone.

*Abusive relationships will destroy your spirit, your emotions, and sometimes your body. It is often difficult to get out of an abusive relationship. It would be much better to be a healthy person without a partner than to live in fear and domination.*

### Develop self-esteem, assertiveness, and respect for themselves & others

Another way to help your teenager avoid abusive relationships is by helping them develop self-esteem and assertiveness.

Help them develop respect for themselves and others. Teach them to communicate their feelings clearly and state their opinions directly.

### Model conflict resolution and problem solving techniques

Model conflict resolution and problem solving in your family to teach them the skills they need in other relationships. If you can't provide a healthy model in your home, there are classes or books to teach them productive confrontation skills.

### Challenge tolerant attitudes toward violence

Speak up when you see tolerant attitudes toward violence. Challenge the myths about domestic violence, and affirm that no one deserves to be emotionally, verbally, or physically abused. Critique what you see in the media, and help raise the awareness that violence is never justified.

### Teach teens the principles of healthy relationships:

- ◆ Both partners give and take, each getting their way some of the time and compromising some of the time.
- ◆ They respect each other and value one another's opinions.
- ◆ They support and encourage one another's goals and ambitions.
- ◆ They trust one another and learn not to inflict jealous and restrictive feelings on the other if they should arise.
- ◆ Neither is afraid of the other.
- ◆ They communicate openly and honestly, and make their partners feel safe in expressing themselves.
- ◆ They share responsibility in decision-making.
- ◆ They accept the differences between them.
- ◆ They encourage each other to have friends and activities outside the relationship.<sup>1</sup>

### Develop open communication

It is essential for her safety to keep communication open and safe between

you and your teenager. If she knows you will be judgmental, disapproving, or controlling, your teenager will refrain from telling you anything about her personal life. Try not to over-react, and restrain from immediately telling her what you think or feel. Practice effective listening which acknowledges her feelings and establishes the facts. Proceed cautiously with offering advice, and encourage her to communicate with other adults with whom she feels safe. If you have been in an abusive relationship, share some of your experiences with her.

### Help her develop a safety plan

If she is ready to break up with the abuser, help her develop a safety plan to prepare for his reaction and possible harassment. Identify safe places she can go if she can't get home, people she can call in emergencies, people she can alert about the situation, ways to handle medical emergencies, people who can accompany her going to and from school, etc. Involve family members and friends to create a safety net and a good support system. If she is not willing to break up with him, try to brainstorm all the possible actions she can take when he becomes violent or when she senses tension is building.

### Avoid power struggles

Most ultimatums don't work with teenagers. It requires a delicate balance to respect your teen's choices while making effective interventions for her safety.

### Seek outside help

Find out what community resources are available to help both parents and teens. It may be necessary to seek counseling from someone who has expertise in domestic violence. Join a support group, and find out if there are support groups in your area for teenagers. Be prepared to use law enforcement and legal resources if necessary.

Above all, take this situation seriously. Remain available for your teenager to talk to whenever she is ready, educate yourself on domestic violence, and seek support. You are not alone.

<sup>1</sup> What Parents Need to Know About Dating Violence by Barrie Levy and Patricia Giggans